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Coup de Genre: The Trials and Tribulations of Bülent Ersoy¹

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BÜLENT: Help me Doctor, save me from this depression. Am I a woman or a man? What am I?

DOCTOR: Calm down.

The End of Fame (Orhan Aksoy, 1981)



[FIG 1: Bülent Ersoy under arrest, 30 November 1980]

When Jacques Derrida was writing his intervention into genre theory, the essay entitled “The Law of Genre,” he could not have known that half a continent away in Turkey, a famous and extremely popular pre-op transsexual singer was very publicly transgressing the laws of genre and gender in the process of her “transition”. As he wrote about a very different kind of self-referential and ultimately uncategorizable text, Maurice Blanchot’s *Madness of the Day* (*La folie du jour*, 1973), how was he to know that in Turkey a film was being made that so bedeviled both genre and gender categories that it could have provided him with even more intriguing fodder by which to deconstruct generic certainties. Starring Bülent Ersoy, the most famous transsexual

¹ This article is dedicated to our friend and colleague, Marcos Becquer (1964-2011) who we are certain would have loved the madness wrought by the figure of Bülent Ersoy, if only we had had the chance to introduce him to her delightful, if at times dubious, charms. Thank you to Cüneyt Çakırlar and Serkan Delice for giving us the needed impetus to pursue this research, and to those who have graciously read drafts and contributed their knowledge, intelligence, and labor to this effort: Meltem Ahıska, Zeynep Dadak, Müge Gürsoy Sökmen, Ferhat Taylan, and our two anonymous readers. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Turkish are our own.

star in Turkey then as now, *The End of Fame* (*Şöhretin Sonu*, Orhan Aksoy, 1981) is a hastily thrown together, poly-generically perverse, biographical mish-mash of a film that openly addresses Ersoy's gender dysphoria, and stages it in part as a crisis of genre. Notably, Ersoy's public transition, on-screen and off, coincided with another sort of public transition – a full-tilt military coup – bringing her face to face with the law in a seemingly endless series of trials. A legal system that one would have expected to be decisive, categorical and definitive under stern military rule betrayed its own illogic when faced with Ersoy's stubborn intransigence and utter inability to obey the normative laws of gender. The fact that her case threw the law into crisis after crisis, and produced one legal inconsistency after the next, could easily have served as an exemplary scenario to expose Derrida's proverbial "madness of the law," when confronted with gender/generic uncertainties.

While most will deem *The End of Fame* and Blanchot's 1973 *récit* so different as to be incomparable, it is difficult to resist the urge to mix and mingle. And since *The End of Fame* is more than itself,² overflowing into Bülent Ersoy's real life trials and tribulations, we encounter some key common motifs across these (con)texts: the medico-legal representatives of the law who demand the self-accounting of the protagonists; the protagonists' flirtation with the law ("To tempt the law, I called softly to her, 'Come here; let me see you face to face'")³ and indeed, the protagonists' ability to "alarm" and "terrify" the law and the men of law. Derrida, we might add, considers the protagonist of *The Madness of the Day* to also be a transsexual character.⁴ So, when he decreed, albeit disingenuously, that genre – and by implication gender – must not be mixed,⁵ we believe he could have easily been referring to Bülent Ersoy, the Turkish judicial system, and/or *The End of Fame*, all of which we will be discussing at some length in this essay.

We begin here with an analysis of this nearly forgotten queer gem of Turkish cinema, moving in and out of it to several of Ersoy's real life court cases in order to explore the question of transgression in relation to the laws of both gender and genre. The

² Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Glyph 7* (Spring 1980), 81.

³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*. Translated by Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981): 9.

⁴ Derrida "Law of Genre", 76.

⁵ Ibid., 55.

purpose of this analysis is essentially to establish the ways in which Ersoy – as a person, as a character, as a star, as a citizen – destabilizes categories both real and textual, enabling us to perform a queer reading of a crucial moment, indeed, a particularly dark period in Turkish history. This is not to make an improbable heroine of the star, nor to resuscitate her for activist purposes – an impossible task considering the unalignable and even at times hostile positions Ersoy herself has taken with regard to both LGBTT activism and the left.⁶ Our aim here is rather to review and thus present anew an aspect of queer Turkish history that we believe deserves a more attentive analysis than it has received heretofore. As will become evident, the timing of these events is meaningful: not only did Ersoy's transition coincide with the lead-up to and the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état, but *The End of Fame* was released precisely during the week of her gender reassignment surgery, a mere six months after the military took power. It is these simultaneities that propel both the film and the real life character of Bülent Ersoy on an unintentional collision course with this other set of events that we believe marks them and was in turn marked by them.

The matter of generic transgressions, as we will see, is not as straightforward as it may seem. There are ways in which this text fits all too well within the parameters of a certain type of Turkish melodrama of the 1970s and '80s and ways in which it departs. As many readers will be aware, it was far from the exception, possibly even the norm, for Turkish cinema of the late 1970s and into the '80s to cross genre and

⁶ The ambivalence of her status in relation to LGBTT concerns is amply communicated in Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay's article "Reconstructing the Transgendered Self as a Muslim, Nationalist, Upper-Class Woman: The Case of Bülent Ersoy", *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Fall-Winter 2008): 210-29. Although it provides a good overview of Bülent Ersoy's career as a public figure, especially for a readership entirely unfamiliar with Turkish popular culture, the article uncritically rehearses the more commonplace LGBTT disappointment in and criticism of Ersoy. In focusing on Ersoy's self-presentation as "a conservative, Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman" and on her refusal "to use her transgendered status as a way to challenge gender codes, heterosexism, patriarchy, nationalism, capitalism, or conservatism" (216), the author fails to recognize the profoundly disruptive effects of Ersoy's desire to obey, the destabilization effected by her bargain with hegemony, and the ultimately irreducible unruliness of this public figure. One episode that Altınay marshals twice in support of his argument is a good case in point: In the wake of the assassination of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink in early 2007, Bülent Ersoy, during one of her TV appearances, denounced the popular slogan "We are all Armenians", chanted by hundreds of thousands protesting the assassination. Ersoy expressed her discontent with the slogan, asserting vehemently: "I am not a Christian. I am the Muslim daughter of Muslim parents". In analyzing this merely in terms of Ersoy yet again capitulating to the terms of Turkish-nationalist-Muslim-conservative ideology (which she of course is) Altınay misses the remarkable destabilization and de-essentialization of Turkish-nationalist-Muslim-conservative identity produced by Ersoy's claim that she was born a Muslim girl. A more nuanced discussion of Ersoy in relation to queer politics can be found in Eser Selen, "The Stage: A Space for Queer Subjectification in Turkey" in *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* Vol. 19, no. 6 (2012): 730-749.

break all rules of narrative cohesion, if not coherence. Indeed, unlike the predominantly literary genres that Derrida was writing about, filmic genres, and certainly Turkish filmic genres, have always mixed to some degree.⁷ We might even say, as cultural critic Murat Belge did at the time, that Turkish film made up a genre of its own.⁸ *The End of Fame* is no exception in this regard, and we will not claim that it is unrecognizable amongst its filmic peers in relation to particular formal or narrative properties. In fact, it can be situated easily within the strand of Turkish cinema that features the most popular singers of the day, based loosely on their biographical details of which the public would likely already have been aware.⁹ This particular type of mixing found its expression in Turkish cinema from the 1940s onwards in “films with songs” (*şarkılı filmler*) where popular singers played the leading role in films that served as vehicles for their songs.¹⁰ In the 1970s, these films were associated with the emergent arabesk style of music and featured all of its top stars,¹¹ including Ersoy, who made more than ten such films.¹² Yet there are nonetheless some identifiable features of this film that may be said to exceed the form.

⁷ All films can be said to be generically impure, indeed the issue is not a matter of pure vs mixed genre but one of excess — the intensified and exaggerated mixing of generic elements. Turkish cinema of that era is close in form to Egyptian filmic conventions in its nearly incessant generic mixings, see Martin Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 19, 97n36.

⁸ Murat Belge, *Tarihten Güncelliğe* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1983), 424.

⁹ Martin Stokes, “Music, Fate and State: Turkey’s Arabesk Debate,” *Middle East Report* (Sept-Oct 1989): 27.

¹⁰ For a brief history of this genre borrowed from Egyptian cinema, the first Turkish example of which was *Allahın Cenneti* (Muhsin Ertuğrul, 1939) featuring Münir Nurettin Selçuk, see Meral Özbek, *Popüler Kültür ve Orhan Gencebay Arabeski* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2010), 150-52.

¹¹ The musical style known as arabesk became popular in Turkey the mid-1970s, and was so named because of its hybrid roots in predominantly Arab-influenced melodies. Other arabesk stars of the day, such as Ferdi Tayfur, İbrahim Tatlıses and Orhan Gencebay also “used cinema as a showcase for their songs.” Zeynep Dadak, “İsyanla Tekniğin Buluşması,” *Altıyazı* 85 (June 2009): 35.

¹² Surprisingly little has been written in English about Arabesk films as a genre or cinematic movement. When referenced at all in the now multiple books on Turkish cinema, it is generally relegated to a dismissive footnote, as in Eylem Atakav’s book *Women in Turkish Cinema*, where she says “The term ‘arabesque films’ is named after arabesque music, which is a popular genre in Turkey influenced by Arab popular and Islamic folk music. These films have singers of arabesque music as their main characters and tell tragic life stories particularly related to migration from Eastern to Western Turkey.” p. 49, fn 47. Gönül Dönmez-Colin dismisses it as a derided decadent form that “conveyed a sense of nostalgia felt by the alienated urban Anatolian for the old traditions.” She does note, importantly, that the genre was “[c]learly masculinist and mostly sung by men, ...idealiz[ing] the rural home left behind and lament[ing] the impossibility of return...” *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008):40. We eagerly await the full-length study of arabesk cinema in Turkey forthcoming by Zeynep Dadak (PhD Dissertation, NYU Cinema Studies, in progress).

Why mention genre transgressions when it is a commonplace in this type of filmmaking, one might ask. To which we reply that in this particular case, the “madness” of the text throws light on the blurred boundaries between a fictional account and its real life counterpart, making indistinct the transitions and interpenetrations between the two; the formal and narrative excesses of this film exquisitely mirroring the unusual challenge that Ersoy posed to the law. Indeed, just as Blanchot’s text, according to Derrida, satirically practices all genres to finally “inundate and divide the borders between literature and its others,” (“Law of Genre”, 81) *The End of Fame* too, fuses various genres to overflow not only the boundaries between fictional genres but also those between fiction and documentary, reenacting and pre-enacting real life events. Even if dwelling on the ruptures of basic storytelling rules and the unlikely ordering or juxtaposition of events in this film would only place it in the context of the madness of the day’s filmmaking conventions more generally, dwell we must. For despite the resemblances this film may have to others, this is no ordinary story, and its narrative excesses and incoherencies unleash some unexpected resonances and effects. True to its arabesk roots, *The End of Fame* is a triple genre film: a melodrama, biopic, as well as a musical. Significantly for our purposes, it also incorporates documentary incursions, featuring an endless stream of actual album covers, newspaper headlines and concert footage, making it not quite a documentary, yet frequently breaking the fourth wall of the biopic with the eruption of actuality.¹³ There was no dearth of material to choose from with all of the press attention Ersoy received, but with the outlandishness of its subject matter, this film has added impetus to shore up its biographical claims.

The film begins with a jolt, after the silent, almost somber credits over black, opening with a shot of a nightclub marquee emblazoned with Bülent Ersoy’s name in huge letters, accompanied by a soundtrack of her singing. From there the film intercuts footage from several of her live concerts. The costumes range from modestly feminine in a tight but tasteful pants suit, to flauntingly femme, her heels impossibly high and her dresses glitteringly sequined, even though the film ostensibly begins

¹³As Stokes notes, “[in arabesk films] the interdependent relationship of film and reality is striking.” *Arabesk Debate*, 138. Earlier in the book he also specifies that “the life stories of arabesk [singers] are intimately known and regularly updated in the tabloid and music press. Details of these biographies combine with their coverage in the press and the stories told in the films which the singers invariably retain their ‘real’ names...to form a fictionalized biography that is essentially bound up with the experience of the music.” 114.

with the premise that Bülent is a heterosexual man, complete with a girlfriend.¹⁴ Yet the footage unequivocally establishes the star with her thousands upon thousands of adoring fans, in all her glory, as if to say, this story is going to defy social norms, but rest assured, her mainstream audience accepts and adores her. The integration or incorporation of actuality footage from concerts and appearances could, of course, have an economic motive as well, since it would have been far cheaper to use footage from a concert (or rather six different concerts) than to stage them for the film.¹⁵ But in a story that is about to go a bit haywire, and a subject of gender dysphoria certainly pushing boundaries of credibility at the time, such documentary authentications may have also been deemed necessary, beyond any economic calculations or filmic conventions. If the public could so admiringly embrace her stage persona, then they could be enlisted to sympathize with its consequences behind the scenes. It becomes a matter of complicity and ultimately, the gambit seeks allies wherever they may be found, in this case, with the Turkish “public”.



[FIG 2a +2b]

¹⁴ There is an important precedent to this ruse with the films and stage career of Zeki Müren, whose famously and undeniably feminine costumes were so outlandish that they were sometimes likened to a space alien’s wardrobe, despite the fact that he always played a heterosexual man in his films. However, Müren, for all of his flamboyance, always remained discrete about his sexuality, never mentioning it publicly and indeed denying it when asked directly, whereas Ersoy has been a much more publically controversial figure. For an interesting discussion about Müren’s costumes in relation to gender and sexuality, see Stokes, *Republic of Love*, 45fn 5, 64-66. Also mentioned in Gönül Dönmez-Colin’s introduction to her book, *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008):17-18. The most insightful English-language discussion we’ve encountered with regard to Müren and his stage persona is Eser Selen’s essay, “The Stage: A Space for Queer Subjectification in Contemporary Turkey,” op cit.; while Umut Tümay Arslan provides a masterful reading of three of his films in relation to the anxieties of Turkish national identity, citizenship and modernity in “Sublime yet Ridiculous: Turkishness and the Cinematic Image of Zeki Müren”, *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45 (Fall 2011), 185-213.

¹⁵ There are many instances of archival concert footage being used in this type of film more generally Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 114-115 and 123. The radical gender bending of this film distinguishes it from its contemporaries, though it has to be said, it is very much in line with, though goes further than, earlier Ersoy vehicles.

The film is replete with vertiginous pleasures, as the spectator is asked to behold a high-fem pre-op transsexual performing herself as a young man — with tits — as s/he sings a love song to his/her beloved and long-suffering girlfriend in what must simultaneously be seen as a *lesbian* love scene. [FIG 2a +2b] Wealth and success come easily but happiness eludes, driving Bülent to secretly consult a psychiatrist who counsels (her) to give (his) heterosexuality another go, though she is undoubtedly a woman in affect and appearance in the scene. The star narrates the story of her “humble” childhood to the psychiatrist as we see an image of a huge family mansion, and inside it an effeminate little boy clumsily playing with dolls and makeup. Later on she is spotted near a park by a child who looks up at his mother and asks the question on everyone’s mind, not least the star’s own: “Mother, is Bülent Ersoy a man or a woman?” The question echoes in the mind of the already haunted Bülent as she is driven aimlessly around the city by her chauffeur in her finest furs, “A man or a woman?” resounding in her tortured ears. Here we have all the hallmarks of camp as outlined many years ago by Susan Sontag: extravagant excess, celebration of artifice, style over substance, narrative failures, and above all, a naïve wish to be believed.¹⁶ Indeed, for all its excesses, this is a text that hopes to have some credibility, positioning its star as a troubled but ultimately well-intentioned and responsible member of society, propping its claims upon the documentary verification of the archival material.



¹⁶ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” originally published in 1964 in the *Partisan Review*, reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 275-92. This article has, of course, come under attack by many queer theorists since, from Michael Bronski and D. A. Miller, to Ann Pellegrini, but we still believe, despite its inconsistencies and its alleged indifference to the specificity of the gay/lesbian subcultural context, that her ruminations are nonetheless an indispensable touchstone for any discussion on camp and prove particularly apt here.

[FIG 3: Bülent in the psychiatrist's office who tells (her) to give (his) heterosexuality another go]

Narratively, the film incorporates at least four conflicting strands that the script makes some — inevitably failed — attempt to resolve at the end: The story of Bülent's transition which is utterly bereft of linear chronology; Bülent's (straight? lesbian?) affair with her girlfriend Aslı; Bülent's (straight? gay?) relationship with her male violinist Doğan; and the story of her rise to fame, stricken with the same chronological hysteria that saturates the entire film. The plot proceeds fitfully, jerking from one strand to the next, unpredictably and without logic, though with great and unmotivated costume changes. It is not only Bülent's transition that is told in shall we say, "creative chronology," but every other aspect as well. How is it, for instance, that girlfriend Aslı, who is with Bülent every evening as the star performs in sequins with feather boas and high heels, doesn't notice until more than half way through the film that Bülent is not quite the man she thought he was? "To whom do these women's clothes, this jewelry, belong?" she asks incredulously as the violins swell to emphasize her shock and dismay.¹⁷ The unruly narrative itself seems to reflect, in the form of hysterical symptom, the madness of the day.

This film, chronicling Bülent's rise to fame and her gender crisis, is significant in terms of its wider historical context, the timing of its release, and its place within Ersoy's biography and filmography. Let us take the "calculated risk" and try to convey this context as linearly as possible, even if it may be something of an affront to *The End of Fame's* convoluted chronological circumlocutions.¹⁸ Bülent Ersoy made a swift rise to fame in the mid-1970s as a male singer, interpreting classical Turkish songs with his widely acclaimed style and voice. At the height of his fame, in 1979, Ersoy began to publicly and visibly transition from male to female – she started

¹⁷ Disavowals such as these are perhaps not uncommon in narratives of cross-dressing and even transsexuality. The difference in this film from other cross-dressing narratives (e.g., *Some Like it Hot*, Billy Wilder, 1959, *Tootsie*, Sydney Pollack, 1982, *Victor/Victoria*, Blake Edwards, 1982, etc.) is that Bülent's character is seemingly unaware of herself, made to disavow her own 'difference' even as she is driven to distraction by it. Unlike the films mentioned here, she has nothing to gain and everything to lose by the acknowledgment of her gender expression, despite its insistent appearance. This is different too from all the more rare trans narrative (e.g. *Boys Don't Cry*, Kimberly Peirce, 1999) where passing as one's chosen gender is the main goal. In *The End of Fame* Bülent is meant to, at the same time, both be and not be gendered female. This is the central bind of the film.

¹⁸ In attempting to discuss Blanchot's *récit*, Derrida conveys yet another directly applicable sentiment when he says, "It is even less feasible for me to relate to you the story of *La folie du jour* which is staked precisely on the possibility and the impossibility of relating a story." "Law of Genre," 67.

hormone therapy, and began to dress and present herself as a woman. This was quite controversial, of course, and irresistible to the press, even in the midst of a tempestuous climate of political violence, austerity measures, and localized martial law enforcements. A page one news article from the widely circulated daily *Hürriyet* on 18 January 1980, gives us an indication of the effect that her transition was having on the public.¹⁹ The headline blares: “Bülent Ersoy was debated in Parliament.” The smaller font headline above notes that due to this diversion, a parliamentary commission failed to discuss crucial martial law legislation in the same session. In the summary of the article we learn that the Parliament addressed the question of austerity measures only after the Ersoy debate. Let us emphasize here that the austerity measures in question were the infamous 24 January 1980 decisions, the implementation of which were widely considered to be the economic impetus for the 12 September 1980 coup d’état.²⁰ According to this telling news article, Ahmet Buldanlı from the conservative Adalet (Justice) Party, took the floor to speculate that Ersoy must be tremendously wealthy based on photographs of her²¹ with expensive jewelry. He expresses his suspicions that she must not be paying enough tax and calls the country’s prosecutors to task for not going after her. But when we read the full speech, we realize that this highly speculative claim as to Ersoy’s tax liability is partly a subterfuge,²² and the main issue at stake is the mixed feelings brought up for him by her body in transition. On the one hand Buldanlı talks about the “degeneration of morals in Turkey” and calls for propriety, dignity, humanity and Turkishness, referring to Ersoy as “[t]his goddamned freak who no one knows whether it’s a man or a woman.” On the other hand, he seems not to have been able to take his eyes off of this “woman...with a beautiful cleavage,” saying, bewilderingly, that she’s “more beautiful than most women who consider themselves beautiful.” Bülent Ersoy’s response cleverly emphasizes this ambivalent desire: “For some reason Ahmet Bey

¹⁹ “Meclis’te Bülent Ersoy tartışıldı,” *Hürriyet*, 18 January 1980.

²⁰ See Feroz Ahmad, “Military Intervention and the Crisis in Turkey,” *Merip Reports* (Jan 1981): 5.

²¹ In Turkish, no gender pronouns are used, so Buldanlı would not have given the gender in this context, though shortly thereafter, we see he has indeed “gendered” Ersoy female in the most lascivious terms. It is impossible to translate into English without using gender pronouns, but it may be helpful for the reader to keep in mind that everywhere “she” or “he” is used in a quote or paraphrase, the original Turkish is actually gender neutral. This is particularly important for our translations of newspaper articles, lest the reader were to assume that the media was either forced or able to gender her by use of third person pronouns.

²² Subsequent to Budanlı’s tirade on the floor of the Parliament, the government does go after her for alleged tax evasion.

has fixated on me. Given that he speaks about me when the important problems of the country are at stake, he must have something in mind.”²³

Soon after, in March 1980, Ersoy declares that she would undergo gender reassignment surgery.²⁴ The following month, *Beddua* (*Curse*, Osman F. Seden, 1980), Ersoy’s film just before *The End of Fame*, went on general release. In the production phase it was announced that this was to be the last film where Ersoy would perform a male role and the costume shopping that Ersoy did for the film was treated in a newspaper article, with the headline, “Bülent Ersoy Wears Masculine Clothing.”²⁵ The character that she plays in *Beddua* is a provincial, poor but dignified, sensitive, artistically-inclined young man. *Beddua*’s specious internal logic suggests that a sexual assault by a male villager during his childhood made the young Bülent indifferent to the charms of women, yet he nonetheless falls in love with Perihan, the daughter of the factory owner where he works. Perihan also loves him, but the class difference between them makes their love impossible. In the meantime Bülent proves his superior musical talent as a young teacher at the conservatory, but is forced at gunpoint to perform in night clubs. Here the montage sequence of several stage numbers indicates time passing and with it the transformation of Bülent’s stage costume, which becomes increasingly feminine. There is no dialogue, yet we understand that some sort of transition is taking place with regard to his/her gender expression. In this film, as in *The End of Fame*, newspaper headlines are introduced to indicate the change. These headlines are not integrated into the narrative of the film, but they are clearly performing an expository function. At the end of the film, when the lovers are finally reunited after many years with the promise of heterosexual redemption for the fallen Bülent, they are caught in the crosshairs of Perihan’s ex-husband’s rage. He shoots them both, thus effecting the cinematic death of the not quite convincing heterosexual male Bülent, never to be seen on screen again, except in flashback drag.

²³ “Meclis’te Bülent Ersoy tartışıldı,” *Hürriyet*, 18 January 1980.

²⁴ “Bülent Ersoy kadın oluyor!,” *Hürriyet*, 5 March 1980. This declaration is followed in the same article by Ersoy’s challenge: “the first thing I’ll do after the operation will be to settle accounts with the parliamentarian Ahment Buldanlı, who criticized me in the parliament. I’ll make him fall for me. I’ll prove to him that I’m a woman.”

²⁵ “Bülent Ersoy ‘erkekçe’ giyindi,” *Hürriyet*, 12 January 1980.

After the general release of *Beddua*, Bülent Ersoy's first major newsworthy public stunt was to expose her breasts at a concert in August 1980. She was prosecuted for indecent exposure and the first hearing of her trial took place on 2 September 1980, from which point onwards, she made front page headlines every single day until 12 September, when the tanks rolled into Ankara and she was upstaged by the coup d'état. It only took about a week or so after the coup for Ersoy to find her place back on the front page when she was arrested for drunkenly insulting a judge. She was imprisoned and kept in a ward of her own, as prison authorities were unable to decide whether she belonged in the men's or the women's ward. By now she was involved in two trials simultaneously: one for indecent exposure, one for insulting a judge on duty.

It is reported that Ersoy initially wore women's clothes to her hearings. Then we read in an article dated 7 October 1980, "it has been announced that Bülent Ersoy will appear at her trial tomorrow in men's clothes as a show of her remorse."²⁶ In November, after about a month and a half in detention, she was found guilty in both trials, given a fine in the first, and a prison sentence of eleven months and twenty days in the second. However, her sentence was suspended on account of her "good behavior," presumably because she appeared in male attire at the sentencing trial. The newspaper reports that the judge concluded Ersoy's trial with this word of advice: "This is your last chance. Use it well. Get your act together."²⁷ The elements that we've emphasized here — disorderly conduct, legal trials, the attire, the contrition, the judge's unsolicited advice — all find dramatic expression in *The End of Fame*, mere months later.

In January 1981, the Istanbul police vice-squad issued an official warning to Ersoy as well as to others who "resemble more a woman than a man in their clothes and behavior onstage and in their private lives." She was forced to sign a statement confirming that "from now on while performing, I will wear normal clothes on stage and I will refrain from any unseemly postures or behavior."²⁸ In this way she, along with other M2F trans and crossdressing performers, was effectively banned from

²⁶ "Bülent Ersoy duruşmaya erkek giysileriyle çıkacak," *Milliyet*, 7 October 1980.

²⁷ "Bülent Ersoy önce mahkum oldu, sonra tahliye edildi," *Milliyet*, 4 November 1980.

²⁸ "Bülent Ersoy giyimini düzeltmesi için emniyete çağrılarak uyarıldı," *Milliyet*, 28 January 1981.

appearing on stage in women's clothes. At the end of March 1981, Ersoy traveled to London to undergo the gender reassignment surgery that she had announced over a year before. When she went under the knife on 14 April 1981, *The End of Fame* had been on general release in Turkey for a week, the film effectively transitioning her in her absence. In a recent interview, Ersoy revealed that the film in fact funded her surgery.²⁹

In the film, as in life, Ersoy finds herself face to face with the law in both the juridical and psychoanalytic sense. Her gender transition for the courts (celluloid and otherwise) appears to be less a matter of bio-medical concern than a social and moral one, badly in need of sound judgment, guidance, and if necessary, regulation.



[FIGS 4-7: Clockwise from top left: Doğan her violinist, the psychiatrist, Nihat her manager, old friend Murat]

The law, the force of the regulatory norm, is variously embodied in *The End of Fame* through a wide array of male characters, and yet with each, their authority is eventually and inevitably compromised or subverted. There's Bülent's kind but stern manager, Nihat, a fantasy of a father figure who while appreciative and supportive of Bülent, also disciplines her and tempers her tendency for tantrums and other such

²⁹ “‘Deniz Gezmiş gazoz alırdı ben ona şarkı söyledim’: Bülent Ersoy, İzzet Çapa’ya konuştu,” *Habertürk*, 3 January 2012.

diva-like behavior. But Bülent behaves so badly, so outrageously, that she manages to alienate even him until they are ambiguously reunited at the end of the film. There's the shrink, a parody of Sigmund Freud with his goatee and thick glasses, who attempts to impose the medical norm, and though he serves to introduce a short-lived narrative order into the film ("Tell me about your childhood") his hetero-normative intervention fails spectacularly to bring Bülent into line. Then there's Doğan, Bülent's composer/violinist and love interest, who is charged with the task of reciting the "public morality" line to Bülent, reprimanding and rejecting her for her "unacceptable" lifestyle which goes against the "values of our society". And yet, he (and with him, one could argue, the entire public morality construct) is totally compromised when the film finally insinuates that he actually did get entangled with Bülent before rushing into propriety by engagement to a decent young woman. Then there's Murat, an old friend to both Bülent and her girlfriend Aslı, who admonishes Bülent for depriving Aslı of what she deserves: a real man. He further declares authoritatively, with his mustachioed masculinity intact, that "neither I nor society deem you a man". Bülent is able to buy back Murat's respect and high opinion, in a classic exchange between men à la Lévi-Strauss, handing the girlfriend over to Murat for marriage,³⁰ to which Murat responds with a mix of admiration and humility: "Forgive me, I was wrong about you, you are indeed a magnanimous and honorable person."



[FIG 8: The judge]

³⁰ Although this is not Bülent's only macho manoeuvre in the film (she protests loudly when Murat insults her masculinity, and the scene of her drunken bout with Doğan has some violent macho overtones, despite the girly scream at the end), it is by far the most pronounced. Precisely at the moment when she is meant to be renouncing her claims to masculinity, admitting once and for all that she is never going to fulfil the role properly, she does so by trading a woman in a back-door negotiation between men (herself and Murat).

This stumbling parade of male embodiments of the law culminates with the literal arrival of the law in the form of the judge toward the end of the film: Bülent is on trial for drunken, disorderly conduct, not at all unlike the behavior for which she had been tried in real life only months before. The judge appears at a point in the narrative when the previous contenders have utterly failed to contain her unruliness, and her scandalous conduct has reached new lows. In this scene, which is featured in the film's poster,³¹ the charges are dropped: Bülent is acquitted. The concluding trial scene serves, of course, as a fictional re-enactment of her recent real life trials. But presciently, too, it serves even more as a fictional *pre-enactment*, "reiterating in advance" as Derrida would say, more real life trials to come.³²



[FIG 9a and 9b Ersoy at her various real-life hearings]

Indeed, the first seven years of Ersoy's post-op public life were marked by recurrent newspaper images and accounts of her standing trial. These accounts detailed her clothing, makeup, hairstyles in the courtroom, at times even more than the substance of the trials themselves.³³ In this period it was distinctly as if life imitated art where the penultimate scene in *The End of Fame* was being endlessly repeated in actual court appearances as recounted in salacious newspaper and magazine articles. In

³¹ See Fig. 10.

³² Not to belabor the connection to Derrida's reading of *The Madness of the Day*, but here too Derrida's description of that text as creating "a permanent revolution of order [as] it follows, doubles, or reiterates it in advance" is particularly apt. And we would be remiss in this context, if we were to ignore the suggestive process of "invagination" that he claims the pre- and post-shadowings produce. "Law of Genre," 71.

³³ For example, one such article announces in the caption, "Bülent Ersoy, who came to court in a black and silver striped fox fur over a black silk bodysuit and huge gold earrings dangling from her ears, handing out autographs to her fans." In the summary of the news piece we read, "While her lawyers insistently referred to her as Miss Ersoy, the judge objected saying, 'In court one is referred to by one's name only, no "misters" or "misses" are allowed here,' upon which Ersoy replied, 'Pardon me, Your Honor, but this is how I am accustomed to being addressed.'" *Milliyet*, 3 December 1981.

addition to several trivial trials (i.e., for disorderly conduct, contravening foreign currency laws, tax evasion, forged travel documents, copyright infringement, etc., for which she was mostly acquitted), Ersoy had to deal with two major simultaneous legal battles that began upon her return from London and went on for almost a decade. One was her legal battle to gain official recognition as a woman, and the other was the public performance ban targeting her as a “homosexual”, or a “man who wears women’s clothing”. In these intertwined legal processes, it is not an overstatement to claim that Bülent Ersoy unsettled the law by virtue of her very being.

If the representatives of the law in *The End of Fame* reveal their inadequacy and inconsistency, consider now, the bumbling incoherence of the actual legal apparatus in the face of Bülent Ersoy’s claims. Ersoy was neither the first post-op transsexual in Turkey, nor the first person to attempt to change her official gender status. There had been several others preceding her case, and to our knowledge, all were successful.³⁴ Thus, it was neither outrageous nor unheard of for Ersoy to have gone to court with her claim, upon returning from London.³⁵ In that first, straightforward case, the judge referred Ersoy to a local Medical Council for physical examination along with ordering a notarized translation of the medical report from England. When the doctors from the council stated that they could detect no difference between those who are born female and Ersoy, the judge approved her application.

However, within weeks, a public prosecutor appealed this decision, claiming that although Ersoy was “in appearance” a woman, she could not be considered a “real woman” medically, despite the medical reports to the contrary.³⁶ The Supreme Court sat on the case for a full six months, before eventually deciding that Ersoy’s gender case be retried since, “in order to establish whether the claimant has become a woman

³⁴ According to Michael R. Will and Bilge Öztan, before Ersoy’s case there were at least five known successful cases who applied to officially change their gender. For this, a general provision was used which allowed amendment of personal details (such as place/date of birth, name, religion, etc.) in the state registry and thus on one’s ID card, subject to a judge’s approval. See Will and Öztan, “Hukukun Sebebiyet Verdiği Bir Acı: Transseksüellerin Hukuki Durumu,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi* 43, no: 1-4 (1993): 235. For more information on these cases, see Adnan Öztürel, “Transseksüalizm ile Hermafroditizmde Yasasal Tıpsal ve Adli Tıp Problemleri (Kadınlaşan Erkekler, Erkeklaşan Kadınlar, İki Cinsliler), Kısım II,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi* 38, no. 1-4 (1981): 268-73.

³⁵ The court where she filed then and subsequently was the Fatih District Court in Istanbul, otherwise known as the Fatih Court of the First Instance.

³⁶ “Bülent Ersoy’un kadınlık kararının bozulması için Yargıtay’a başvuruldu,” *Milliyet*, 4 July 1981.

in the real sense of the word, medical opinion must be sought.”³⁷ This decision ignored the obvious fact that the first decision was based precisely upon such medical opinion.³⁸ Nonetheless, as in any good comedy of errors, the case was retried in May 1982, in the same local court. This time the court referred her to the “fully equipped” Şişli Children’s Hospital, requesting an additional report from the Psychiatric Chair of Çapa Medical Faculty. Conveniently, and in direct contradiction of all previous reports, these two authorities claimed that Ersoy was “not a transsexual but a male homosexual, and therefore had failed to become a woman, though without the possibility of returning to his manhood.” On the basis of these reports, the public prosecutor argued that “the principles of biology and law” do not allow for someone to “have artificial female genitalia made for himself and then go on to claim that he’s a woman.” Ersoy lost the retrial.³⁹ One of the phrases in the legal judgment would haunt Ersoy during the course of these trials: “No one can do as they please with their body.”⁴⁰

Delayed but not deterred, Ersoy’s next attempt to gain official recognition as a woman was two years later, in 1984, again in the Fatih District Court. This time, she had acquired a report from the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (Adli Tıp), which stated without equivocation that she was a woman in terms of her physical appearance, genitalia and psychology.⁴¹ Still, the lower court refused her claim, so she once again appealed the decision.⁴² The same Supreme Court that had previously stated the need for medical authorization, chose, this time, to disregard the medical report produced by the highest medico-legal authority in the country. So in a

³⁷ Yargıtay 2. Hukuk Dairesi, 21 January 1982, E: 1981/8911, K: 1982/259, *Yargıtay Kararları Dergisi* (1982): 323.

³⁸ Another strange twist in this case was that two members of the Supreme Court had opposed the decision to retry the case, wanting to rule against Ersoy instead. They claimed that Ersoy could never be considered a woman and thus that “there is no necessity for further investigation, since the complainant was born male and lived as a male beyond puberty.” The dissenting opinion stated that “the sex change operation was a wanton, willful act the consequences of which the complainant would simply have to endure.” “Otherwise,” the text goes on, “this would make it possible for every man wishing to benefit from the advantages of being a woman to achieve this by taking on the role of a woman. There is no doubt that this would alter the equilibrium of nature and destabilize and confuse the value judgments of society.” Also see Deniz Kandiyoti, “Pink Card Blues,” in *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber, eds. (London: IB Tauris, 2002): 279n13.

³⁹ Fatih 3. Asliye Hukuk Mahkemesi, 6 September 1982, E: 1982/254, K: 1982, 420.

⁴⁰ “Bülent Ersoy’un kadınlığı reddedildi,” *Milliyet*, 7 September 1982. The retrial was appealed and this time the Supreme Court upheld the lower court’s decision.

⁴¹ “Adli Tıp Ersoy’un kadınlığını kabul etti,” *Milliyet*, 23 December 1984.

⁴² “Doktorlara göre kadın, hakimlere göre erkek,” *Milliyet*, 24 January 1985.

complete about-face, contradicting all previous decisions, the high court ruled that in fact, a medical report could not have any effect on the legal decision, and that the lower court was correct in refusing Ersoy's claim. The detailed decision published later is an extraordinary piece of garbled legal rhetoric, employing highly improbable logic, and an unseemly moralizing tone that displays the court's utter incomprehension of the condition of gender dysphoria, as well as its bias against all non-normative expressions of gender. It also reveals quite succinctly the threat which the undecidability of the transgender body poses to the question of identity upon which such legal judgments rest. Here is an excerpt from the decision:

The laws currently in force do not allow sex change on the basis of personal will [...] Such permission [...] would pave the way for fraudulence before the law. For example, persons unable to divorce their spouse would undergo sex change and thereby obtain the opportunity to divorce on the basis of the principle that people of same sex cannot be married. Others may use this opportunity to evade their duty as men to perform their military service [...] or to gain the right as a woman to retire earlier, or to profit unfairly from other such benefits.⁴³

The Supreme Court's fantasy of the subject who undergoes gender reassignment surgery in order to avoid military service, facilitate a divorce, or expedite retirement⁴⁴ is fascinating on various counts. First of all it betrays the court's sheer ignorance of how complex a psychological, medical and social process transitioning can be. The assumption here is that if gender reassignment was allowed, everybody would do it, especially so in order to relieve themselves of their filial, civic, and economic obligations. The citizen/subject imagined here is one that wants out and given the opportunity, will do anything to dodge (his) duties. The decision also betrays a desire to police differential gender obligations to the state, underpinned by the presumption that being a woman comprises a lesser form of citizenship. Further, the fantasy exposes how the law conceives of the transgender body that stands before it as something that threatens the very foundation of its authority. When faced with a body that proclaims itself other than transparent, and a "personal will" that decides the fate of its own body, thus placing it beyond the absolute control of the law, the law exclaims "Fraud!", thus establishing its power over subjects precisely through a knowledge of the body. Indeed, as many readers will be aware, this anxiety of fraud vis-à-vis transgendered bodies is not limited to this particular moment in this

⁴³ Yargıtay 2. Hukuk Dairesi, 27 March 1986, E. 1986/651, K. 1986/3256, *Yargıtay Kararları Dergisi* (1986): 1112.

⁴⁴ Historically the minimum age of retirement has been lower for women in Turkey.

particular country. In his extensive research on transgender jurisprudence in common law countries, Andrew Sharpe discusses how the law has been motivated by a similar fear of fraud with regard to marriages involving transgendered persons.⁴⁵ In a more recent study, Paisley Currah and Tara Mulqueen explore the contemporary high-tech security apparatuses in airports operated by agents who depend on gender as biometric data, that is, as unchanging information from the body, consequently often perceiving transgendered persons as other than who they claim to be, and thus as potential security threats.⁴⁶ Similarly universal are the specific areas of biopolitical investment that the Turkish Supreme Court's 1986 decision on Bülent Ersoy reveals, namely in the areas of marriage, military and work.

However, in reading this scandalous decision⁴⁷ it is also important to think about what is at stake specifically in Turkey under military rule. The decision continues:

[...] The fact that the appellant is now incapable of reclaiming his capacities as a man due to an operation that he underwent of his own free will, does not justify that he be granted his wish to be recognized as a woman. [...] Everyone must suffer the consequences of their mistakes. It is not right to look for solutions on the basis of sentiments. Because as compassionate as the law is in the face of right, it is unyielding in the face of misdeed.⁴⁸

The court rules out sentiment as a basis of legal judgment: It will refuse any affective bond with Ersoy, it will resist seduction by her appeals. The “misdeed” referred to in this passage has to do with the court's delineation of willfully undergoing gender reassignment surgery as a breach of Article 23 of the Turkish Civil Code which legislates against the illegal or immoral waiving or restricting of one's own rights and capacity to act freely. A creative interpretation of this clause allowed the Supreme Court to assert that “No one has the right to dispose of the integrity of their body (including their sexual integrity and its continuity)”⁴⁹ and thus to represent Ersoy's act of undergoing surgery as an infringement of her own personal rights. In other words, a clause that was formulated to protect individual liberty was recast as an interdict

⁴⁵ Sharpe explains this fear in terms of law's homophobia. See especially Chapter 5 in Andrew N. Sharpe, *Transgender Jurisprudence: Dysphoric Bodies of Law* (London: Cavendish, 2002).

⁴⁶ Paisley Currah and Tara Mulqueen, “Securitizing Gender: Identity, Biometrics, and Transgender Bodies at the Airport,” *Social Research* 78, no: 2 (2011): 557-582.

⁴⁷ Undersigned by a majority including Justice Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who later served as the President of the Republic of Turkey between 2000 and 2007.

⁴⁸ Yargıtay 2. Hukuk Dairesi, 27 March 1986.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

against gender reassignment.⁵⁰ It is crucial to note here that this decision came in the wake of a military coup, the deeds of which included hundreds of thousands of arrests, widespread torture, hundreds of deaths under detention, judicial and extrajudicial executions, and the denaturalization of thousands of people, among various other atrocities.⁵¹ In the context of this immediate historical background, the language of the Supreme Court decision indicates that the state not only reserves the right to withhold recognition of atypically gendered bodies, but even more starkly, it claims the right to dispose of the personal rights and bodily integrity of its subjects, as its exclusive, sovereign prerogative. Remember the line from the ruling four years earlier: “No one can do as they please with their body.” While in essence the state always retains such authority, the restrictions become considerably more stringent under military rule, and such flagrant intransigence displayed by the unruly Bülent Ersoy was most certainly not to be countenanced.

The second major legal struggle Ersoy was embroiled in was the stage ban, related to but distinct from her gender recognition saga. Going back chronologically to 1981, when Ersoy returned from London and had (temporarily) gained recognition as a woman, she was scheduled to take the stage for her first post-op concert performance. On that very day, 11 June 1981, the Istanbul police, who had been conducting an investigation against “homosexual performers”, concluded that “Ersoy rose to fame by promoting [his] homosexuality”, and banned her from performing in Istanbul. The authorities noted that a decisive factor in this decision was that Ersoy was “seen as encouraging young people with homosexual tendencies”.⁵² When Ersoy retorted that she was not a homosexual but a woman, and therefore should be allowed to perform on stage, the Governor of Istanbul, Nevzat Ayaz, insisted that she was splitting hairs, claiming that Ersoy had been a homosexual before becoming a woman. Following Istanbul, the ban was enacted in Ankara, Bursa, Izmir, Kocaeli, and eventually in all cities in Turkey, as well as on the national (and at that time the only) radio and television broadcasting company, TRT. The legal subterfuge they used for this ban

⁵⁰ The legal ‘logic’ that finds expression here and magically turns liberties into prohibitions in the name of *raison d’état* can be said to underlie Turkey’s 1982 Constitution, the most oppressive in the republic’s history and still in operation.

⁵¹ “12 Eylül’ün bilançosu”, *NTVMSNBC.com*, 12 September 2007, accessed 27 August 2012, <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/419690.asp>.

⁵² “Bülent Ersoy’un sahneye çıkışı yasaklandı”, *Milliyet*, 12 June 1981.

was based on articles 11 and 12 of the Police Duties and Authorities Act, which used to read as follows:

Article 11. Those who behave in ways that run counter to propriety and decency, and speak and sing and play music to such effect, who verbally and otherwise harass women and young men, or who incite young persons to any and all types of immoral behavior shall be banned by the police.

Article 12. Girls and women who wish to work in night clubs, bars, music halls and other such venues where alcohol is served, or to take up occupation in public baths, hammams, and beaches must request official permission from the highest local authority in the vicinity.

To summarize, the first of these effectively targeted homosexual and cross dressing performers of questionable morals; the second required any female performers who wish to work in clubs, bars, music halls, etc., to request official permission from the highest local authority.

Ersoy's lawyers applied to the Council of State, the high court which handles administrative rather than legal decisions, claiming that the stage ban was against the law and an infringement of Bülent Ersoy's right to work. They argued that Ersoy had been deemed medically a woman (which was indeed the case at the time) and that therefore she was no different from other women performers, nor had she behaved indecently, or in any way to corrupt public morals. The Council of State appears to have agreed with Ersoy's lawyers that she was indeed a woman, but rather than passing judgment on the legality of the ban, the Council evaded its duty and refused the application, referring her back to the very authority that had banned her, saying that as a woman, she needed to seek the permission of the highest local authority, in this case the Governor of Istanbul, if she wanted to perform. So, instead of fulfilling the function for which it was created (evaluating administrative decisions, and thus, in this case, considering whether the ban was justified and whether the legislation used for it was appropriate), and completely ignoring the contradictory claims that were the basis of the ban (how could she be both a homosexual man and a woman simultaneously?) the high court refused to review Ersoy's application, effectively binding her up in a legal catch-22.

A couple of years later, Ersoy reapplied to the Council of State to lift the ban on her public performances. Referring to the recent Supreme Court decision that Ersoy was legally a man and not a woman, the Council of State, in contradiction to their prior

ruling, this time ruled that Article 12 of the Police Duties and Authorities Act *did not* apply to Ersoy, and that being a man according to law, Ersoy could work in nightclubs without permission from the highest local authority. Further, the Council of State noted that Article 11 did not apply to Ersoy either, as there was no open case concerning immoral behavior by the appellant. The logical conclusion of these statements should have been, one expects, that the ban on Ersoy's public performances had to be lifted. However, the Council of State maddeningly concluded instead that: "Since the claimant is still a man, there is nothing unlawful in refusing, on the basis of Article 12, the claimant's application to perform as a woman. Thus the claimant's application has been refused."⁵³ What this mismatched preamble and conclusion meant to convey was: although there is no basis for lawfully suspending Ersoy's right to work, it is possible to ban her from publicly "performing" as a woman. And what this meant in practice was that Ersoy could perform publicly, but only if she wore men's clothes. In this thoroughly indefensible judgment, the high court was saying that legally she was to be considered a man, but if she insisted on wearing women's clothes then she would be treated like a woman. Note the high court's impressive "clothes make the (wo)man" logic here. In other words, this decision, no less creative in its narrative coherence and sense of causality than *The End of Fame*, commanded Ersoy to enact a convoluted transvestism, demanding a bizarre *drag king* performance that only certain scenes in the film could match. But this time, Ersoy refused the demand in no uncertain terms, holding a press conference to announce that she would not publicly perform in Turkey.⁵⁴

The newspaper archives tell us that this entire process thrust the law into a series of farcical inconsistencies. For example, exactly at the time that the district court refused her claim to be a woman in the first retrial, Bülent Ersoy was under arrest for battery and was being held in the women's ward. She remained there after the decision for another two weeks, that is, until she was released, even though she had been legally declared a "man". Furthermore, in the hearing for battery, she defended herself saying: "If I had actually been involved in a fight, at least one of my fingernails would have broken. Further, I am a woman! How could I take on this man?" The fingernail

⁵³ Danıştay 10. Hukuk Dairesi, 19 January 1983, E: 1982/788, K: 1983/66.

⁵⁴ "Bülent Ersoy yurt içinde sahneye çıkmayacağını açıkladı," *Milliyet*, 1 June 1983.

defense seems to have worked, for it secured her release.⁵⁵ Then following the Council of State ruling allowing her to perform publicly only in men's clothes, thus effectively prolonging her stage and television ban, the film *Acı Ekmek (Bitter Bread)*, Yılmaz Duru, 1984) featuring Bülent Ersoy as a woman, a wet-nurse no less, went on general release across the country, apparently with no legal impediment or controversy, other than newspapers exclaiming bemusedly: "Now she's breastfeeding!"⁵⁶

The whimsical absurdities encountered throughout Bülent Ersoy's legal struggle for recognition as a woman and the attempt to lift her stage ban are too numerous to recount. However, for the subject waiting before the law, its whims can prove traumatic, and in any case are not to be underestimated. We must understand the devastating effect of Ersoy's stage ban in terms of how the music industry functioned at the time in Turkey. Before the ban, Ersoy's performances were not limited to a handful of tours and concerts per year. When she signed a contract with a club, she performed every evening consecutively for an average of forty days, and sometimes much longer.⁵⁷ In the months following her operation, she not only had to endure this enormous blow to her career and the Kafkaesque quagmire of gender (mis)recognition, but was also bombarded with a series of petty charges (all eventually dismissed) such as smuggling foreign currency and forging travel documents. This torturous and multifaceted legal assault led the singer to attempt suicide in January 1982. In the news piece entitled "Ersoy attempted suicide by swallowing a bottle of pills," we read that she was upset for being called "*toplumun yüz karası*" or "a disgrace to society" — but literally, "the stain on the face of society".⁵⁸

⁵⁵ "Bülent Ersoy tahliye edildi," *Milliyet*, 23 September 1982.

⁵⁶ We'd like to thank Veysel Eşsiz for alerting us to this point.

⁵⁷ For example, according to the ads we traced on the classified pages of *Hürriyet*, during the 8 month period between January and September 1980, when she was arrested, Bülent Ersoy performed consecutively for 46 nights in Ankara, then 72 nights in Büyük Maksim, Istanbul's foremost night club at the time, followed by five straight weeks at another Istanbul club, and two or three weeks at yet a third Istanbul venue, and finally on to another 20 days in Izmir before she was arrested on charges of insulting a judge. A conservative estimate puts her on stage every night for six and a half months of the eight month period.

⁵⁸ "Bülent Ersoy bir kutu ilaç içerek intihara kalkıştı," *Milliyet*, 31 January 1982.

It is entirely unclear here whether life follows or foreshadows art on the matter of *yüz karası*. *Yüz karası* is not only a phrase commonly used in Turkish to denote disgrace, and one frequently applied to Bülent within and outside this film, it is also the prescient alternative title to the film, and the title of its hit song.⁵⁹ Although we have not been able to find any contemporary reviews of *The End of Fame*, the timing of the release must be seen as a kind of pre-emptive public relations maneuver to steer the public's sympathy to the star's side even before the real legal battles begin. In the film, Bülent is at times taciturn, volatile, spoiled, disturbed, but in the one almost coherent aspect of the film's narrative, all of the moodiness and misbehavior is attributed to one of two things: stardom and the gender crisis at the heart of the character. It is even intimated that the gender crisis is in part the result of the extreme fame.⁶⁰

The film posits her fame as a distinct aspect of the problem, the arabesk conventions dictating that the heights to which a star climbs be in equal measure to the depths to which she will inevitably fall, hence the film's official title, *The End* (as in "the consequences") of *Fame*. As everyone knows, divas misbehave, have tantrums, and generally come to no good end, though it may be worth noting here that this is a largely feminine teleology, one from which men are usually exempt. The logic of this teleology is unquestioned in the film and apparently in need of no explanation. The most important function of this equation (fame → crisis → downfall = disgrace) emerges in the final scene of the film, when the narrative is able to come to some closure by way of substitution: the problematic of fame stands in for the problematic of gender with a barely perceptible sleight of hand. When the former is hastily resolved, the gender crisis is assumed to have been magically brought to some conclusion as well. The question of gender crisis that the final scene attempts to trick us out of is in fact the pivotal nexus of the film, never fully replaceable by any other category and remaining stubbornly enigmatic throughout. Yet the viewer is left with

⁵⁹ It was not uncommon for an arabesk film to be built around a hit song that frequently bore the official (or as in this case, secondary) title of the film, and also the soundtrack released from the film. See Stokes, *Arabesk Debate*, 142. As for the indeterminacy of the double title—this polyonymy is shared, ironically, by the other unstable text referenced here, *The Madness of the Day*, which was confusingly published in 1949 originally as either '*un récit?*', or '*un récit*', see Derrida 72-73.

⁶⁰ We see this implication not only in the title of the film, but also for example in the psychiatrist's response to Bülent in the film: "Mr. (*sic*) Ersoy, you're undergoing a psychological crisis. We must examine the reasons for this crisis. It could go way back to your childhood or it might have to do with your fame."

little choice but to content herself with the conceit that it is indeed the ignominy of fame that has brought about this bright star's downfall; its trappings are, if we are to believe the narrative, what bring shame upon her.

According to Martin Stokes, a standard theme for an arabesk film is the irremediable fall of the protagonist who has been battered by destiny. Often, the protagonist in question is poor, uprooted, alienated in the city as a rural migrant, and cast out by society. The basic plot formula that Stokes identifies for arabesk films involves “a sequence of progressive dislocation and disintegration, leaving the protagonist in a state of wretchedness and loneliness” while the function of the “structural machinery of the drama is to provide a series of focuses, each one a stage in the fall of the protagonist.”⁶¹ These stages are marked by the songs in the films, and the title song is usually performed at the apex of the drama when the character's fall has reached such a nadir that the only thing left is his or her honor.⁶² *The End of Fame* draws on this general formula: the story of Bülent's fall, as she becomes more capricious and ill-tempered by the day, eventually abandoned by all her friends and loved ones as her scandals reach new crescendos and she drinks herself into oblivion. It is indeed possible to measure the stages of the fall by the songs in the film and further, the hit song, *Yüz Karası*, which also provides the theme music to the soundtrack, is indeed placed at the dramatic peak of the film. However, even though it hosts the structural features of a typical arabesk film, the differences are significant, queering the genre in important ways. To begin with, there's nothing poor about Bülent, she's got three servants, a chauffeur driven Mercedes, and a closetful of expensive furs and jewelry. Nor is her character a migrant from the countryside, adrift in big city life. She's wealthy, urbane, spoiled even. Yet she too is a victim of her fate. In her character's own typically overwrought words, she has “reached the height of fame without tasting even a drop of happiness.” Though not a migrant, she is nonetheless an outcast – banished from her family home, barred from the hegemonic gender order, and without hope of finding shelter in the arms of a lover or the bonds of marriage. And when she finally hits rock bottom, it would be difficult to say that all that remains is her honor, considering that it is precisely her lack of honor, her inability to be brought into line that brings disgrace and shame upon her, and leads to her fall.

⁶¹ *Arabesk Debate*, 141.

⁶² *ibid.*



[FIG 10]

We find the first sign of the question of honor and shame in the film's poster. In the poster's central frame, Bülent, hair cropped, sits before the law, wearing what is for her at the time "male" attire, with two prison bars in front of her and two uniformed gendarmes at her back. Below this image is the film's main title, underneath which the alternative title, *Yüz Karası* (Disgrace) is stamped as if the law's judgment has already been passed. In the background collage of newspaper clippings, which are also featured prominently in the film, the headlines shout: "Scandalous" and "Shame," indicating the film's key concerns. Can it not be said that a film that stamps itself "disgraceful," and announces itself as "scandalous," in fact embraces or appropriates shame for its own purposes? Throughout the film, Bülent is accused of behaving scandalously and disgracing herself, as we are taken into her world of pain, ridicule, rejection and reprimand, all endured by her with a great deal of distress and hand-wringing. As mentioned earlier, Bülent's dark destiny finds its most touching expression in the song *Yüz Karası*, the lyrics of which translate as follows:⁶³

⁶³ We are grateful to Bülent Somay for his generous translation of the lyrics to this song. The Turkish lyrics are as follows: *Kimimiz köşelerde kimimiz dillerde / Çekeriz biz bu derdi her birimiz bir yerde / Sen de feryat ederdin düşsen böyle bir derde / Felek yazarken kaderimi melekler ağlamış göklerde // Bendeki bu yara mahşer yarası / Kaderime diyorlar yüz karası / Hangi gönül çeker böyle bir yası / Kaderime diyorlar yüz karası // Kim kınarsa beni düşün bu hallere / Yeter allahım yeter sebep kim*

*Stuck in a corner alone, or the talk of the town
We suffer here and we suffer there, like a mourning dove
You would wail too if you were so cast down
When my destiny was writ, angels wept above*

*The wound I suffer is a wound of doom
The fate I suffer, they call it shame
What heart can endure such desperate gloom
The fate I suffer, they call it shame*

*You who condemn me, should suffer the same fate
Enough, O Lord! Who is to blame for this trouble and woe
Why so much suffering, Lord, let no one carry such weight
When my destiny was writ, angels wept above*

Notable and rare in the history of Turkish popular culture in that it publicly posits a “we” of gender/sexual outcasts, the lyrics to this trans-blues song indicate that the character holds on to whatever shred of honor is within her grasp, citing fate rather than willful arrogance as the cause of her distress. Destiny wrote her fate, all that is left is to endure. As discussed earlier, several of the subsequent legal decisions against her claimed the very opposite, designating her gender reassignment surgery as a wanton, willful act, the consequences of which she would simply have to endure. The lyrics of the song tell a different story, though we will see shortly that in truth she is not all that dismayed by this destiny, and indeed takes some pleasure in “enduring” it. How can we account for this veritable embrace of shame within a queer modality?

Remember, almost coeval to the rise of queer studies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recuperated shame as an essential, perhaps indispensable affect in the process of identity development and queer differentiation.⁶⁴ Sedgwick points out that the physical affect of shame, what she calls shame’s “proto form” is expressed by the

çilemize / Neden verdin bu derdi, verme başka kimseye / Felek yazarken kaderimi melekler ağlamış göklerde.

⁶⁴ This inspired theoretical intervention was prompted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s article “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” in the very first issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (1993). An indicative list of this reappropriative move towards shame within queer studies would include: David Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds., *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Hampshire: Ashgate Press, 2008); Elspeth Probyn, *Blush* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Sedgwick’s article originally published in *GLQ* reappears in modified form as “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *the Art of the Novel*,” in *Touching Feeling*: 35-65.

pose “eyes down, head averted”, precisely the pose struck by Bülent at the beginning of the title song number.



[FIG 11]

Indeed, in Bülent’s display of shame we see just the kind of identity delineation that Sedgwick describes. Having been made to feel the shaming gaze of others, Bülent is able to defiantly assert her distinctiveness in the theatrical performance of what Sedgwick calls the “transformational shame” of queer performativity, which in turn she defines as “a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma”.⁶⁵ Shame appears, Sedgwick argues, when a connection has been broken in communication, when the desire of one is rejected by another. She further asserts that without this moment of rupture, differentiation is impossible, and it is precisely that difference that allows for a recognition of identity and desire: “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in a very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstitution and foundation, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating.”⁶⁶

This very experience of social isolation and its resultant feelings of shame is precisely what is being described in this song; the loss of (positive) reaction prompting Bülent’s lament. Sedgwick is careful to distance the notion of shame from that of guilt and repression, instead thinking it alongside “sociability”, wherein shame functions as an

⁶⁵ *Touching Feeling*, 61.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 36.

indicator of an interruption of the seamless communication between self and other, a point where individuating identity can begin to develop. And indeed it is here, at this heightened moment of shame, where we can begin to see Bülent's trans-character finally asserting itself, albeit through — or perhaps on account of — the haze of shame. When we analyze the lyrics carefully, we see that although she is made to feel shame by others, shame is not her own designation of her “suffering”, it is “theirs”: “*they* call it shame.” And though the shame heaped upon her causes deep grief, making her plead with her god to stop the pain of it, she never claims to have done anything to deserve it, or that she is at fault. She innocently accepts her damnable fate, while at the same time embracing it.

The fatalism of these lyrics is typical of arabesk, wherein, “a person is trapped by fate just as he or she is trapped by society.”⁶⁷ There is even a pleasure to be found in this pain, as can be seen in the fully embodied affect Bülent evinces in her soulful performance. She is taken up with it, transported by it, moved. It is not guilt that consumes her but emotion. Beneath her pain lies the steely conviction of the immutability of her fate, which no amount of misguided pressure from society can change. The fact that she's singing this arabesk trans-blues in a see-through ruffled lace shirt that makes the most of her figure, with the sequined appliqué seeming to caress her lovely breasts as she sings, suggests that we are meant to see her transition as *fait accompli*, or better, “fate” *accompli*. It is a fact, not something to be negotiated or regretted, contrary to the Supreme Court's later insinuations. The flamboyance of her costume(s) also points to the possibility that fate and desire are not entirely unhitched. From the very start of the film we are treated to a series of outfits that flaunt her femininity for all to see. Her fate may have been written to the sound of weeping angels, but she is surely going to make the most of it while she can. Here she is, caught between fate and desire, somehow making the best of both, despite the troubles they may cause. For if this was her fate, she was fated to be fabulous, let those who damn her eat their hearts out!

To put this in cultural critic Nurdan Gürbilek's terms, we may situate this star in an interstice between two key moments of arabesk, reflecting a major cultural shift in

⁶⁷ Stokes, “Music, Fate, and State”, 29.

Turkey during the 1980s. According to Gürbilek, arabesk's first incarnation in the 1970s was one of pure fatalism, wherein the downtrodden simply had to endure their plight. She then identifies a perceptible shift, sometime in the middle of the 1980s, where that fatalism gives way to an entitled acquisitiveness that refuses to defer its dreams and desires indefinitely. In other words, this somewhat fatalistic, yet somewhat opportunistic character of Bülent fits right in-between a 1970s arabesk modality of self-sacrifice as represented by the more classical and infinitely more respectable, "older brother" figure of Orhan Gencebay, and a modality that emerges by the mid-1980s of the satisfaction of selfish desire, as incarnated in the "me too" attitude embodied by the swaggering, and somewhat unscrupulous upstart, İbrahim Tatlıses.⁶⁸ Gürbilek sees this not as the eventual and inevitable return of repressed desire, nor as a transition from an absence of desire to its presence, but instead as a process in which the cultural dynamics of desire had shifted. Gencebay's energy is derived from "the fact that he is not given what he wants, and never will be, in this world anyway."⁶⁹ For him, desire is driven by the absolute unattainability of the thing desired, and the absolute honor of the one who desires. However in the cultural climate of 1980s Turkey, which finds expression in Tatlıses, the honor that used to accompany desire has suddenly become meaningless. So while Gencebay "speaks with the gravity of desire impossible to satisfy; he stays on the side of transcendence, taking refuge in the dignity of patience. [In Tatlıses] we have the relief of satisfied flesh, of appetite relished before all the world, and finally of the admission that superficiality is not such a bad thing after all."⁷⁰

When understood in this context, we can imagine Bülent Ersoy wedged somewhere between the two, yet again, a transitional character. In the film, Bülent complains that everything she does is misunderstood and curses her dark destiny, while nonetheless declaring to one detractor who is too afraid to go against society's norms in order to be with Bülent, that in the end "one must live for oneself." The rich but kind-hearted Bülent of this film, whose honor is in question, is also a transitional character within Ersoy's own filmography. The Bülent of *The End of Fame* sits somewhere in the middle of the range that goes from the poor but dignified Bülent of the previous films

⁶⁸ Nurdan Gürbilek, *The New Cultural Climate in Turkey: Living in a Shop Window*, trans. Victoria Holbrook (London: Zed Books, 2011), 90-100.

⁶⁹ Gürbilek, 99.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

to the flirtatious femme fatale of the later films.⁷¹ In *The End of Fame* what Bülent rails against is not only her destiny but also those who try to bring her into line, those who would obstruct her attempt to turn her fate into her desire and her desire into her fate, until, in the penultimate scene, she appears (perhaps deceptively) to capitulate in the face of the law, as it reasserts itself in the figure of the judge.

The tension of the trial scene is quickly dispelled with the announcement to acquit the defendant of drunken, disorderly conduct. Following this, the judge, breaking with protocol, takes the liberty to address Bülent “not as a judge but as your elder,” and begins to dispense his unsolicited advice. He reminds her that she owes her great fame and wealth to the people, warning her that she should not become spoiled by their applause and disappoint her fans. He says, “the artist is the property of society and is accountable to the people.” He counsels her to set a good example for her young fans who emulate her, and to be an asset not a detriment to the nation to whom she owes everything. Bülent responds with respectful obedience, vowing to follow his advice. She is released from prison, picked up and driven away to brighter days by her ever-forgiving manager Nihat. Aside from Nihat’s unexpected transformation from a strictly paternal figure to her knight in shining Mercedes, what remains ambiguous is the fate of the gender crisis, brought only to a feigned resolution in her sincere submission to the judge’s advice on how to navigate fame.

In contrast with this compassionate, paternal judge imagined by the film, you may remember only months before *The End of Fame* was released, a real-life judge warned Ersoy to “get her act together,” in a considerably less charitable tone. In fact, the law with which Ersoy found herself face to face in the 1980s was, as we have discussed here, highly whimsical, unyielding, and cruel. When one traces her misadventures in court through the newspaper archives, it’s difficult not to wonder why she came under such a sustained and vicious legal attack. One explanation is that Ersoy simply suffered her share of the brutality of the military regime at a time of extreme political repression.⁷² The timing of her eventual victories in her two main legal struggles

⁷¹ Similarly in terms of her discography, we are beyond “Mahşeri Yaşıyorum” (“Doomsday is Upon Me”) but there’s still a long way to “Sefam Olsun” (“The Pleasure is Mine”).

⁷² In his meticulously researched article on the recent history of the legal subjection of transgendered bodies to surveillance and state intervention in Turkey, Veysel Eşsiz argues that the coup allowed the army to impose its moral codes on society without restraint: “Devletin Eli, Beli, Sopası: Anlatılmamış

corroborate this argument. Her stage ban was lifted in January 1988. Earlier, in September 1987, a general referendum had repealed the ban on many politicians, who then participated in the first elections since the coup, in November 1987. Her recognition as a woman in March 1988 thanks to an amendment in the civil code was also indicative of the relative relaxation of the military's grip on social life. So we could say that just as Ersoy was the tabloid symbol, even if utterly apolitical, of victimization by the military regime during its most repressive era, her eventual triumph in her legal battles crystallized the relative liberties that came with the return to civilian rule.⁷³

Then again, this does not fully explain why such an apolitical figure as Ersoy became an almost single-minded target of the authorities. Nor does it take into account a key dynamic of the period, identified and elegantly analyzed by Nurdan Gürbilek. Gürbilek writes of two conflicting but mutually dependent strategies of power that had shaped the political and cultural life of the 1980s. One was the language of the Junta, namely, repression, prohibition, and violence; the second “was a more comprehensive, more inclusive strategy of power, aiming to encircle by speech rather than silence, to transform rather than prohibit, internalize rather than destroy, tame rather than suppress.”⁷⁴ Although it may seem as if one came before the other chronologically (the era of repression in the first half of the 1980s, followed by the civilian rule's relative relaxation in the second half of the 1980s) Gürbilek indicates that these two strategies in fact always co-existed, “each calling upon the other, dependent upon the other for its effectiveness, each owing its legitimacy to the other.”⁷⁵ When thinking about Bülent Ersoy's legal battles in the 1980s, it is important to take this analysis into account. According to Gürbilek's Foucauldian analysis, through a new discourse of “private life”, what had until then been considered *mahrem* (private) was incited to — and thus encircled by — speech, as the prohibition of any substantial political content in the press required that the media

Sürgünden ‘Kabahatlere’ Türkiye’de Trans Bedenin Denetimi”, in *Cinsellik Muamması: Türkiye’de Queer Kültür ve Muhalefet* (Istanbul: Metis, 2012): 185-220.

⁷³ Bülent Ersoy's experience is notably not representative of those of other transgendered individuals in Turkey during the coup era. A recent oral history project by the İzmir-based LGBT organization Siyah-Pembe Üçgen relates stories of widespread arbitrary detention, torture, rape by military staff and police officers, and forced migration: *80’lerde Lubunya Olmak* (İzmir: Siyah Pembe Üçgen, 2012).

⁷⁴ *New Cultural Climate*, 6.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 7

find new areas on which to report.⁷⁶ This shift in the focus of the media was one of the reasons why every move Ersoy made was headline news. For a new press, which was insistently and energetically reporting on sexuality for the first time, filling its pages with the “confessions” of homosexuals and bisexuals, fallen women and flashy men, Ersoy’s gender and sexuality provided endless fodder. Yet what the second form of power — the transformative incitement to speech — provoked, Gürbilek reminds us, in a good cop/bad cop power sharing vice grip, the first form of power repressed. Thus as Ersoy was “incited to speech” in the newly emerging gossip magazines, and on the front pages of the politically restricted papers, the repressive force of the law was simultaneously clamping down on her. It is entirely likely that the very publicity Ersoy attracted and even courted made her an irresistible target. So in a sense, there is a tragic truth in both the 1981 film’s title *The End of Fame*, and her suggestion in a 1984 interview that “All of my troubles have been a result of my fame. This is the price I pay for fame”.⁷⁷

Thus it wasn’t only the newspaper headlines but also the gaze of the law that allowed itself to be distracted by Bülent Ersoy’s transition, amidst a suffocating milieu of political repression. But what should not get obscured in analyzing this displacement from the challenge posed by traditional political opposition and subversion to that posed by Bülent Ersoy’s transition is Ersoy’s very desire for the law, her desire to obey, to be accepted by and incorporated into the law. Ersoy was not a rebel, she was by her own accounts a dutiful if wayward citizen awaiting her legal rights. In fact, the problem (and the reason why she continues to prove so difficult to ally with progressive political causes) was that she expressed her loyalty to norms, rules, and laws at every opportunity. In the attempt to position herself as an exemplary citizen, she performed her desire to obey passionately, despite and through her body, gender, and sexuality, none of which the law was able to either properly comprehend or control. It is our contention that this was the crux of Ersoy’s challenge to the law during the coup era: her stubborn insistence before the law, tirelessly waiting at its gates to be allowed in, incorporated, as it were, into the body politic. Ersoy unsettled

⁷⁶ In terms of film this proscription of the political had specific implications. As critic Necla Algan is quoted as saying, “The political was dangerous and was in jail... Filmmakers were as free as birds to do anything they wanted, as long as they stayed away from the political.” in *Women in Turkish Cinema: Gender Politics, Cultural Identity and Representation*, Eylem Atakav (NY: Routledge, 2013): 48.

⁷⁷ “Bülent Ersoy’dan kadınca notlar”, *Milliyet*, 4 August 1984.

the law in precisely her failure to secure admission into it. And although she doggedly awaited affirmation from the very law that declared “no one can do as they please with their body”, she clearly had no intention of compromising on the conditions of that affirmation.

This unlikely cocktail of obedience to authority mixed with uncompromising determination of will is in fact prophesied in the fictional trial scene of *The End of Fame*. After obediently listening to the judge’s sage advice, Bülent responds with the sincerest of promises to remember his words. But she delivers this pledge with an utterly submissive yet subtly subversive turn of phrase specially chosen for the occasion. She says, if we were to translate literally, “I will wear your advice like an earring in my ear.” While she delivers this classical Turkish idiom without even a hint of irony, there remains little doubt that the earring in question would have to match her necklace and bracelets, accentuating her most glamorously feminine features.

While Ersoy’s desire for the law produces the eminently sympathetic figure of the judge in *The End of Fame*, this desire was clearly unrequited in her real life encounters with the law. The only consistency that the law displayed with Ersoy before it was the categorical rejection of all her advances. The law erected every barrier and in the process produced a plethora of inconsistencies in its refusal to be seduced by Ersoy’s constant appeals; in its insistence on rejecting any and all of her overtures. In this sense, there is something exquisitely camp about Ersoy’s performances before the law, evocative of Sontag’s eloquent definition of camp as the success of certain passionate failures.⁷⁸ The fascinating encounters that Ersoy’s life in the coup era hosted between the law of spectacle and the spectacle of law, between the aesthetic and the juridical law of gender produced many scenes of madness: comedy, farce, tragedy, camp, queer performativity, medico-legal absurdity, authoritarian fantasies of citizenship and gender... At times fitting all too well into a “genre of its own”, at others undoing itself precisely on the grounds of its gender oscillations, perhaps the ultimate coup of *The End of Fame* is to have trespassed well beyond itself.

⁷⁸ “Notes on ‘Camp’”, 291. This piece has been maligned in queer theory for being apolitical, here we highlight its (latent) political potential.

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